

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2022

Statement on the Death of Franco Harris

December 21, 2022

Say the name Franco Harris, and most everyone talks about the catch, the Super Bowls, and the glory he brought to the game of football. But in the 50 years we bonded as friends, I always talked about his character and compassion.

Fifty years ago, the Pittsburgh Steelers had just finished a dominant regular season with their first division title. They celebrated Christmas just days after beating the Oakland Raiders on one of the most famous plays in NFL history, the last-second "Immaculate Reception" by their rookie running back, Franco Harris. While the Steelers would barely lose the conference championship game to the undefeated Miami Dolphins, Franco went on to a Hall of Fame career that led the Steelers to four Super Bowl titles in 6 years as the dominant team of the 1970s.

But that's not why the Pittsburgh Steelers—and Franco—are close to my heart. It was this week 50 years ago when my first wife and infant daughter were killed and my two young sons were badly injured in a car accident while they were out getting a Christmas tree. I had just been elected to the U.S. Senate, and I was in Washington when I got the call and rushed home to Delaware.

I rarely left my boys' bedside until they got better. But one day, I did to go shopping for them. When I returned, they were smiling for the first time since the accident. Art Rooney, the generous and honorable owner of the Steelers, had flown out with a couple of players, including Franco and the tough as nails Rocky Bleier. Busy with their own lives, they took the time to be with my boys, sign footballs, and then left with no publicity, a small act of kindness that meant the world to us.

Sports have a powerful way of bringing people together. As families gather for Christmas this weekend, there will be countless Pittsburgh Steeler and Penn State fans sharing stories of Franco with their children and grandchildren, who will discover his greatness on the field. But I know there will also be countless families like mine that will remember him for all that he did to lift our spirits when we needed it, in the most quiet, personal, and American of ways. We don't have to ask. We show up. We reach out. We share a compassion that is a source of our enduring strength as a nation.

The last few times I saw Franco were in September and November of 2020 on the campaign trail in Latrobe and Pittsburgh. This week of all weeks, my family remembers him and keeps him close to our hearts.

May God bless Franco Harris, a dear friend, a good man, and a great American. May God bless the love of his life Dana, their family, and all of Steeler Nation.

NOTE: The statement referred to Rocky Bleier, former running back, National Football League's Pittsburgh Steelers; and Dana Dokmanovich, wife of Mr. Harris.

Categories: Statements by the President : Franco Harris, death.

Names: Biden, R. Hunter; Bleier, Rocky; Dokmanovich, Dana; Harris, Franco.

Subjects: Deaths, Franco Harris; Football.

DCPD Number: DCPD202201137.